[Theme music ‘Some Spooky Sh*t Is Going On Here’ by Theo Goodwin plays.]

INTRO

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The Underwood Project, Episode Seven: Embalming Process

(*Tape recorder clicks on. Tape static is heard continually throughout.*)

ULYSSES

Statement of Rhys Griffiths, regarding an encounter he experienced in Millard Funeral Homes, his place of employment. Original statement given 20th September, 2009. Recording by UC Bamba, Head Curator of the Usher Foundation, Washington, D.C.

Statement Begins.

I’ve been an undertaker for six years now. Four of those years were spent in Kansas City, with the local funeral home. After my dad died I couldn’t work there anymore, under the roof where they embalmed him. My employers understood. They gave me a recommendation and I was off to DC, to where I’ve been working for the last two years of my life. Millard Funeral Homes. It’s a nice place, with a quiet, reverent atmosphere. Even when there’s no service going on at the time, the place has always had a very respectful and silent vibe. People instinctively whisper upon entry,

like a church or library. It works for me. I've always worked best in silence.

I've embalmed and prepared more bodies than I can even remember. They all blur together, after a while. The ones that died of natural causes, clean and quiet deaths, those are all easy and routine. The embalming process isn't too complicated, really. I'm probably doing a disservice to my profession by saying that, but there really are very few steps when you're dealing with a relatively 'normal' corpse. Even the ones who died as victims of crime or accident are relatively easy to deal with. The autopsy scars aren't as unsightly as you'd think, and there is really only discolouration and the odd bit of scarring after the wounds are stitched shut. If the corpse is a real mess, we simply recommend a closed casket service. Some wounds are harder to make palatable than others, after all. A man who was shot in the head with a shotgun will be a lot harder to make presentable than a man who was stabbed in the chest.

However, what happened to me isn't about one of those cases. This body was something else entirely. I pause in writing about it because I don't know where to begin. I guess I'll just give a step by step to what my method was. This body was truly something else.

I wasn't told what the cause of death was. The head funeral director, when I asked her, just responded with a shrug. Then she left me to it. The body was already on a slab when I got there. I didn't see anyone else enter, or exit the home to bring the corpse in. It was just lying there, peaceful and serene as all unblemished corpses tend to be. This one had to have died of natural causes, I thought, because there wasn't a single mark on the body, aside from some natural paling of the skin after death. It was a man, probably late fifties by my guess, brown hair, brown eyes, white as a sheet. Unremarkable in appearance. Just a corpse.

I started with washing it in disinfectant, of course. Massaging the limbs to remove any stiffness, shaving the areas that would need incisions. The routine. I inserted the eye caps, which are pieces of plastic placed under the eyelids which keep the eyes closed, and I wired the jaw shut. Arranged the face to become pleasant and mild, a small smile playing upon the dead man's lips. The lips were glued shut. He looked like a perfectly normal sleeping man at that point. That always surprises students. Sometimes, until you touch their pallid flesh, you forget that you are among the dead. When you've been working in the service as long as I have, sometimes you forget that there is any difference between the living and the dead, aside from what rests in their arteries.

The circulatory system is drained next. An incision near the collarbone allows us access to the carotid artery and the jugular. The blood all drains out from those two points, and away it flows down the drain. It's a process you get used to, watching litres of blood pour out of a body. It's a process I thought I was used to, at least. This body was different.

The blood that was in the body was… thicker. It had the consistency of resin, slow and syrupy as it hung in long strands as opposed to flowing daintily down the drain. In confusion I allowed myself to touch it, to rub it between my gloved fingers. It was startlingly cold. All corpses are cold once the blood has stopped pumping. The liver is what produces heat in the body, actually, so once that gives up, the corpse is generally quite clammy. This liquid, or substance, or whatever, was colder than that. It was darker than blood, and left a burgundy stain on my rubber gloves. I shook my hand out in surprise and the stuff stuck to me, sticky as it was. Instead of tainting my gloves further I found a metal rod to try and coax the 'blood' out with. All in all it took twice the usual amount of time to dispose of the blood, as I needed to wash it down the drain with some hot water in order to be truly rid of the clotted and thick substance. Perhaps it was foolish of me to brush off such a strange occurrence as a simple

biological fluke. I can’t take it back now, obviously, stupid as I was for not seeing how strange the body was. I filled its veins with formaldehyde and continued with the embalming.

To embalm the organs, you make an incision in the lower abdomen, and from there use a trocar to pierce the organs and remove the body fluids so there is no build-up of gas or the like in the body. The fluid is then replaced with more formaldehyde via the trocar. It’s not the most pleasant of processes, but I find it oddly satisfying, the draining and the filling. This corpse, however, threw another curveball at me in the form of the internal organs themselves.

It took me multiple tries to insert the trocar into the stomach and other organs, and the trocar is not a blunt instrument. It is a sharp, hollow device that pierces tissue easily and cleanly, but when I inserted it into the incision it simply could not break through the organs. After gratuitous effort- and pushing that very nearly saw me and the corpse falling onto the floor from the exertion- I managed to get the spike in. Almost immediately, fluids began to spill out, in quite the opposite fashion to the viscous blood. This was more watery, and I would have called it extracellular fluid had it not been for the colour. Normally, it would be a pale yellow, as it’s mostly composed of plasma, but this fluid was… black. Black and runny and extremely eager to get out of the body. I was baffled at how much fluid spilled from that corpse, given that the body wasn’t bloated at all from the outside. The image of this black fluid emerging from the body was profoundly disturbing to me, especially when combined with the smell of pure rot and decay that accompanied it. Bodies in funeral homes generally do not reach the point where they smell as bad as the body of that man did. It was all I could do not to retch. Disposing of the fluid as fast as it emerged was not an easy job, and I couldn’t find any other undertakers to help me out. The whole place seemed to be deserted aside from me. Just the corpse and I. Its smiling, serene face

now oddly mocking and capricious. The silence that permeates the funeral home at all times was then more of a barrier, an oppressive, trapping force, than the shroud and comfort it had been before. I longed for noise, for music, but the only sound was the occasional drip of liquid and the steps of my shoes.

I may have done a sloppier job than normal stitching up the incisions due to how badly I wanted the job to be over.

It's not my job to make the corpse look pretty. I don't dress it up, or apply makeup, or wash its hair. I embalm it and preserve it and I leave it on the slab for someone else to decorate, so to speak. So at that point, I tried to find Cora, like I do every day, when I'm finished with a corpse. We trade places. That day I could not find Cora. I hung up my gown and disposed of my gloves and other protective material, and tried to find any sign of human life in the funeral home. There was none. -

[*Ringing.*]

Dammit. One second. Hello?

EVER

Hey, darling.

ULYSSES

Hello, love. Ah– one second, let me shut this off– Wouldn't want to be unprofessional, *isn't that right, Adriene?*

[*Tape clicks off, then back on again.*]

ULYSSES

Yeah, of course. I'll grab it after work. I love you.

EVER
Love you too, babe. See you soon.

ULYSSES
Bye, Ever.

[*Phone clicks off.]*

Oh– *Why* is this on? I swear that I– Well. I didn't think I was so out of it to butt dial a tape recorder, so to speak. To be fair, though, I very well could've– It takes a lot out of you to deal with one of the real statements, and– This was a nice break. Good tip for you, Adriene. I'd love one of those.

Anyway. Where were we? God, it's– Hard to get back in that headspace, now.

[*Clears throat.*]

There was, however, not twenty minutes after I had finished, a noise from the mortuary. The sound of movement. So I called for Cora and made my way there. After all the odd occurrences I had seen that day, I should have known better than to follow mysterious sounds. Still, I made my way to the mortuary again.

The corpse was sitting bolt upright, feet placed onto the ground, head in its hands, quiet groans being produced from its throat. At this point I was frozen, in shock, not quite sure if I was still awake. I know now that yes, I was most definitely not dreaming. I wish I had been, though.

The corpse, with a pained and choked sob that couldn't escape its sealed throat, pawed at its eyes and rose to stand, slouched and stumbling. It was off balance and heavy, all the liquid that was placed inside it not an hour beforehand flooding to the bottom of the body with no heart to

pump it around. It removed the eye caps that sat upon its eyelids with a trembling, sickly-pale hand. The caps were dropped to the floor as it opened its eyes, bracing itself on the slab it was lying deceased upon moments before. I could see it flexing its jaw, trying in vain to open its mouth, but the wires sealing it shut would not budge. It gave a breathless scream, nostrils flaring as it clawed at its own face, desperately ripping the jaw downwards. It was breathing so heavily I thought that surely, were it truly alive, it would have passed out from hyperventilation. My blood was so cold that I thought I was going to faint too.

It stopped hyperventilating when it saw me, and locked eyes with mine. It was at that moment when I felt nothing. I saw a living corpse before me and I felt nothing. I should have screamed, ran, anything- but there was nothing. I felt like I was underwater before this abomination of nature, one that shambled towards me, dragging bloated legs and grasping forwards with ice cold arms. It screamed, and I do not know how to describe a scream that was not fully released from the throat. It was not muffled, because there was nothing to muffle it. It was simply trapped behind wire and bone and flesh and it was struggling so hard to be heard. It was heard, though. It was heard by me, and it was the single worst sound I have ever heard. Tendons snapping and blood spilling and the sound of the bereaved wailing for their loved ones all paled in comparison. This was not just human screeching. This was older, something that should never have been. There is no way to describe a sound that should not exist. So I won’t begin to try.

The rest is a blur. The corpse caught me in its glacial hands, dug nails into my arms and drew blood as it clawed and silently begged, until I remembered where I was, who I was, pushed past the being and ran. I must have looked a mess- running through DC streets in my work clothes, wide eyed and bloody. It took me an hour to compose myself enough to return to the funeral home.

There was no sign of the corpse, of course. When I got back the place was in perfect order, my panic the only threat to the choking silence that filled the place. When I asked the head funeral director about the body that was delivered a few hours prior, she had no idea what I was talking about. She asked me if I was feeling alright, what happened, why I was bloody- but I was too frazzled to respond to much. She told me to go home. I came straight to your institute instead. I know the police won't believe me. At best, they'll think I'm mad. At worst they'll think I embalmed a still living person. That outcome is what scares me the most. Someone needs to know about what happened, so I'm making a statement. Do with it what you will, I don't care. I know what happened, even if no one else believes. I don't think I can work in the funeral business anymore, though. I'll probably resign by tomorrow. Heaven knows what I'll do next.

Statement ends.

You know, this wasn't so bad. Cassian looked a right wreck when they gave it to me, so I expected– well. I have no idea what I expected, honestly, but– They looked like they'd seen a ghost.

Yes, yes, be more sensitive to people's statement experiences, but the joke was *there.* Don't fault me for following up on a perfect opportunity.

Speaking of follow-up, I wasn't able to get one with, uh…. Mr Griffiths, but I *did* get one with Cora. She said that Mr Griffiths had been incredibly distressed when he finally did find her - Understandably so - But that the corpse he was talking about didn't exist. She'd also confirmed that he had resigned immediately after, but that no one else in the building had experienced something in the same vein. Everything you'd expect after a run-in with the End, really. It's got a tendency to… Uproot people.

I’ll keep trying to find Mr Griffiths, but I’m not quite sure he wants to be found.

End recording.

[Theme plays.]

OUTRO

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[Theme ends.]